

BUNKO

Developing Children's Reading Interests in Japan

—SATORU TAKEUCHI

In Japan, there is a nationwide parents' volunteer activity. It is called the *Bunko*. A bunko is a mini-library for local children operated voluntarily by a private individual, or a group of parents, to develop a better reading environment for children. As of 1993, it is estimated that nearly 2,000 bunko are active in Japan.

HOW DOES A BUNKO OPERATE?

Because each bunko operates through the voluntary effort, time and expenses of a local individual or as a group, there is no single standard of operation. However, as bunko are mini-libraries, there are similarities among them such as collecting and lending books to child members, and promoting reading habits among children through such activities as reading aloud, playing 'paper theatre', handicrafts such as *origami* and top-making, and storytelling. Such activities are also enjoyed at bunko by handicapped children. Books and activities in foreign languages are supported by International Children's Bunko. These bunko are operated in Tokyo, Tsukuba and other larger cities for Japanese children who have returned from overseas residence. Such bunko are intended to develop the children's language ability and to keep alive their friendship and understanding with the people in the country they lived in.

Site of a Bunko

An individual may use a part of his house, or a group of people can use a local meeting place such as a Citizen's Public Hall, a kindergarten, a religious institution, etc. Some bunko have used

retired and remodeled buses or trains, and children love them.

Collections

The number of books differs from one bunko to another. The smallest one may have less than 100 books, but the largest collections have more than 3,000 volumes. More than half of the bunko in Japan receive 50 to 1,000 books from the local public library for a two or three month period, and thus supplement shortages in their own collections.

Days of Operation

Most bunko open at least once a week, but a bunko operated by an individual may open daily. The average number of children in a bunko on an operating day depends on its size and the nature of the local community, but it may vary from 21 to 50.

Adult Members

The total number of adult volunteers nationwide is estimated to be 15,000, of which nearly 90% are females. Each group gets together about once a week to discuss the operation of their bunko. Topics include book selection, activities to develop children's interests in reading, editing and printing newsletters, cooperation with local libraries, if any, or establishing local public libraries etc.

Cooperation with Other Bunko

The time and resources to operate a bunko are already limited and insufficient. Bunko members therefore cooperate with other bunko nearby and also participate in local and national meetings.

Locally, they form liaison committees to exchange experiences, study children's books, and promote the development of children's reading interests among local authorities. At national meetings, they exchange ideas and experiences, and offer mutual support.

WHY WAS THE BUNKO NEEDED?

The need for the bunko arose from three interests related directly to children and from an additional desire of the parents themselves. Firstly, it is natural for parents to share the joy of reading with their children, and to help them develop a life-long reading habit. Secondly, with the social change in and after 1950 in Japan, parents felt that drastic changes in social structures produced certain undesirable influences, and they hoped to develop in their children the ability to judge for themselves instead of responding to situations blindly. Parents expected that such judgement might be developed by reading and thinking about books. Thirdly, parents realized the paucity of public and school library facilities in their localities, and felt that the only way to improve the situation was to develop a collection by themselves for their children. Finally, these parents, as senior members of the local community, wished to share their book collections with their children, the junior members of the community.

FACTORS TO SUPPORT THE BUNKO ACTIVITIES

Efforts to Develop Better Children's Literature

As Mr. Takeshi Matsumoto wrote in the *WRITER AND ILLUSTRATOR*, October-December issue, 1991, "eminent writers and publishers in Japan have devoted themselves to producing better books for children since the end of World War II." In 1957, some writers, storytellers and librarians formed the *Ketei Bunko Kenkyukai* (Home Library Study Circle). First,

they translated and published prominent American picture books as models for children's books. Their efforts began to attract public interest, and their high standard of literary and aesthetic quality gained approval.

Efforts of Pioneers

Ms. Momoko Ishii, a famous writer and translator of children's literature who was one of the members of the Home Library Study Circle, opened her private library for neighbourhood children in 1957. She published a book, *Kodomo no Toshokan* (The Library for Children) in 1965, based on her seven years experience in the library. She emphasized the importance of knowing each child personally, and of the selection of books. The book has encouraged many parents to open bunko in their own localities.

Mr. Shogo Saito founded the *Nihon Oyako Dokusho Senta* (Japan Centre for Reading by Parents and Children), after retiring from his long career as a primary school teacher. In lecture tours, he demonstrated the art of storytelling and reading aloud, and encouraged parents to read books together with their children, and to open their own bunko.

Another influential corporate body is the *Oyako Dokusho Chiiki Bunko Zenkoku Renrakukai* (The Council for Reading by Parents and Children, and for Local Bunko). Its publication, *Kodomo to Dokusho* (Children and Reading) has inspired parents to think about their children's reading environment, and encouraged them to read books together with their children, and to develop their own bunko.

Efforts of Librarians

Young librarians regarded services for children as one of the fundamentals of library services, and formed the Society for Children's Libraries in 1953. They studied eagerly and published their opinions in their periodical, *Kodomo no Toshokan* (Libraries for Children). The society and the periodical are still active, and members work well as consultants for the bunko.

Efforts of the Bunko Members

Most of the adults are housewives of average income. In order to support their bunko, they have to spend extra time, effort and money, and learn about book selection, storytelling, and sometimes negotiation with local authorities, all of which they may not have thought of doing before. Through these activities, they acquire some personal attributes as bunko members, viz. love for children as junior members of the community, love for books, *esprit de corps*, enthusiasm in bunko activities, and patience. Bunko activities have been supported, operated and maintained by such ceaseless efforts of adult members.

Some of the children in the bunko willingly participate in bunko activities. They may work at the charging desk, demonstrate storytelling, perform the 'paper theatre', and help younger children in selecting their books. Some older children may participate in planning committees for playing outdoor games, going on hikes, or selling their handicrafts at a local festival to make money for buying books. Thus, they learn the bunko activities not only as recipients but also as servers.

Cooperation with Local Public Libraries

In a locality with active public libraries, bunko members can cooperate with them, and they, in turn, help in the maintenance of the bunko. Where there is no public library, bunko may submit petitions to the local authorities to establish one, and thus the bunko makes itself a driving force to create new public libraries. For the library, bunko members offer their opinions on book selection and services from the viewpoint of parents and taxpayers. Such opinions are sometimes good medicine to librarians and local authorities, though perhaps bitter to swallow.

In order to improve communication with librarians, bunko sends representatives to the administrative body of the Japan Library Association (JLA). Mrs. Ikuko Suehiro, who spoke on the Bunko at the Annual Conference of the

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) of 1986 in Tokyo, was at one time on the Board of Trustees of the JLA. Other Bunko members write about their activities for many library periodicals and other publications.

Reactions from Child Bunko Members

Among all positive reactions, those from the children are expected to be the most rewarding. While adults sow seeds in the minds of the children day by day, these seeds will not show any immediate results, and the future crop is not for the sowers but for each child. For the adults, their only satisfaction is seeing the children's enthusiasm in reading and in other bunko activities. Based on their experiences, bunko members are convinced that children are interested in reading if appropriate books are easily available.

Children in bunko in the 60's and 70's have already reached the age of raising their own children. They give read aloud sessions at their homes and willingly participate in local bunko activities. Some of them work as public librarians and school teachers, and have promoted children's reading interests in their places of work. For adult bunko members, such "Bunko Alumni" are the best colleagues.

OBSTACLES TO OVERCOME

Difficulties in building up Sympathetic Understanding in the Locality

The biggest obstacle to the bunko may be the sympathetic attitude of local people and authorities. In Japan, developing literacy has been regarded as a duty of compulsory education, and offering reading material to the public as an exclusive right of the local authority. It also has been believed that an individual person should buy books if he or she really wishes to study. In view of these beliefs, a private individual or a group is not supposed to collect books and lend them out to children. In fact, it is sometimes felt that opening a bunko is an outrageous activity

and an affront to the local administration, and that the bunko members are a group of radicals who intend to disseminate their political opinions in the community by lending books to children. In spite of this atmosphere, bunko pioneers have gradually built up community support with their ceaseless efforts for the children.

Finding a Suitable Site for a Bunko

A bunko must keep many books for the many children and their parents in the community. Hence a large space is required. During working hours it is also noisy due to group activities. Therefore, it is not easy to find such a site.

Keeping A Bunko Open

A new bunko will attract many children, but if the bunko cannot keep supplying new books sufficiently to feed their reading appetite, they will lose interest and stop coming. Evaluating and selecting good books is not an easy task, and buying them is a heavy financial burden. Depression in the national economy hits not only the home economy, but also brings financial difficulties to each bunko which is supported solely by its members.

Paucity of Public Library Service

As of March 1990, there are 3,261 administrative localities in Japan, and 2,081 of them do not have public libraries. Because public libraries are often the source of books and of professional knowledge and experiences for bunko, this shortage means many bunko have to operate without help from their local public library.

Decreasing Population of Children and Their Available Time to use a Bunko

The number of children in Japan is decreasing, particularly in urban areas where the public library service is well developed. Moreover, children have less time to come to the bunko, because, after returning from school and finishing their home work, they are sent to a *juku* - a privately operated tutorial school - in order to prepare for entrance examinations to upper level schools. Therefore children have no spare time of

their own to read books of their preference.

FOUNDATION FOR THE BUNKO ACTIVITIES

In the opinion of this writer, to successfully carry out bunko activities, bunko members must share an identity of views, which can be summarized as follows:

- Children love books and they like to read, if interesting books are available.

- Books are one of the best means to transmit man's creativity in thought, deeds, and aesthetic appreciation.

- A better reading environment can be established by the efforts of adults through sharing the joy of reading with children. One of the key factors is the attitude of adults to learn children's foci of interests, habits of reading, and their ways of development.

- Bunko will influence the reading habits of not only the next generation, but succeeding ones as well, as children themselves become parents and pass on their habits and love of reading to their own children.

- The development of a better reading environment requires cooperation among the bunko members, public librarians, and teacher or school librarians.

- The bunko is concerned not only with developing the members' reading interests but also works to help children and adults to think. In other words, participating in bunko activities offers opportunities to open big windows in the minds of all of its members. In this sense, the bunko has an educational function as well, that of helping its members to develop themselves through their own efforts.

The bunko movement, which is the effort of local volunteers to establish a better reading environment for their children, has met various difficulties, and will meet many more in the future. Whatever these difficulties may be, the efforts will never cease as long as parents wish to

share the joy of reading, children wish to read books and the mind's eyes of parents and children are opened by reading and by the activities of the bunko.

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TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR WRITERS

I Love thy Subject.

II Love thy Reader.

III Thou Shalt not Begin without Prior Meditation.

IV Thou Shalt Know thy Characters as well as thou knowest thyself—even better!

V Thou Shalt not Begin until thou Knowest Whither Thou Goest, and have a well-thought-out Plan for the Journey.

VI Thou shalt Stop when thy Story is finished.

VII Thou shalt not Worship thy Words as Images Graven in Precious Marble.

VIII Thou shalt make a Clear, Dark-ribbon copy of thy Work.

IX Thou shalt study thy Markets diligently, and Only Then send thy Manuscript into the world.

X Thou shalt not brood upon its fate, but set about the Workings of thy Next Project with good will and a high heart.

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